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ABSTRACT

In this speech, the author addresses the method of developing a high level of support for community involvement in an experimenting school. He presents an outline of some specific steps that should guide the process of designing a framework for school support. In addition, the author discusses the planning process and the organizational design of an experimental school team. (Author/DN)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT IN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING AN EXPERIMENTING SCHOOL

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT IN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING AN EXPERIMENTING SCHOOL

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to design a format for that component of Experimenting Schools which speaks to developing community involvement and support for a new idea. The writer addresses this problem from an experience based in The City of Philadelphia. As the former Director of the Parkway Program and the current Director of Alternative Programs, it must be recognized that the recommendations made in the paper lean heavily upon the actual experiences encountered with the "school without walls", The Parkway Program and a number of other innovative programs. While our suggestions are made for a broader, more complex plan of generating support it is also clear that adaptations and modifications will have to be made in consonance with each of the unique local conditions found. There are, however, several "givens" in this area which will apply to the various locations currently involved in this enterprise. Briefly, they are:

1. New educational ideas require a level of support from The Board of Education, the Superintendent, local teachers and administrators and the community if implementation is to take place.

2. A new educational idea such as an International Consortium for Experimenting Schools requires a political/fiscal base from which to operate.

3. The kind of support suggested in items 1 and 2 can only be generated if leadership of the project has a firm handle on the educational dimension of the program and a personal relationship with the individuals who can create the avenues of access needed for implementation.

It is in this context that the following discussion is presented. There is ample evidence that the process described can and has worked in Philadelphia. Learning from this experience should provide the foundation for a successful design to bring about the formation of a fully supported Consortium of Experimenting Schools.

LENGTHY PAPERS WHICH CITE EXTENSIVE LITERATURE SEARCHES AND DELVE INTO THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF A PROBLEM ARE MOST APPROPRIATE FOR SOME TOPICS. HOWEVER, IF YOU WANT TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW TO DEVELOP A HIGH LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN AN EXPERIMENTING SCHOOL THEN IT IS SUGGESTED THAT YOU BE MOST CLEAR ABOUT THE PROCESS, AND THAT YOU HAVE A SERIES OF OPERATING GUIDELINES WHICH ARE DIRECT AND VITAL. IT SHOULD BE OBVIOUS THAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE MOST DELICATE ASPECT OF THE ENTIRE PROGRAM. IT IS IN THIS AREA OF HUMAN DYNAMICS THAT THE EXPERIMENTING SCHOOL CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AND SUPPORTED OR BE MIS-PERCEIVED AND CONDEMNED. THE PRIMARY ASPECTS OF THE PROGRAMS WHICH MUST BE TIED TOGETHER FOR COHERENCE AND COHESIVENESS, THE CLARIFICATION OF NEED AND THE VERY STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOL MUST EMERGE AS A VIVID PICTURE WHICH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD BY THE VARIOUS GROUPS WHOSE SUPPORT IS NEEDED. THUS, A HIGH DEGREE OF COORDINATED PLANNING MUST TAKE PLACE PRIOR TO THE PRESENTATION OF THE PLAN. A SPECIFIC STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT MUST BEGIN EARLY AND BE MAINTAINED THROUGHOUT THE PLANNING STAGES AND INTO THE PERIOD OF IMPLEMENTATION. THIS LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT WILL, IN FACT, BE AN ONGOING FUNCTION OF THE PROGRAM WHICH CAN AID TREMENDOUSLY IN INSURING THE ULTIMATE SUCCESS OF THE PROJECT.

THE OUTLINE WHICH FOLLOWS SUGGESTS SOME VERY SPECIFIC STEPS WHICH SHOULD GUIDE THE ENTIRE PROCESS UNDER DISCUSSION. PRESENTING NEW IDEAS INTO THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR IS AT BEST A RISKY BUSINESS. WHEN YOU ATTEMPT TO BRING ABOUT DRAMATIC CHANGE THIS RISK IS COMPOUNDED. THEREFORE, IT IS SUGGESTED THAT THE FOLLOWING TASKS BE PLANNED FOR AND ACCOMPLISHED AS THE PROGRAM MOVES INTO A REALITY STAGE.

1. CONVENE A REPRESENTATIVE GROUP OF THOSE INDIVIDUALS WHO WILL BE AFFECTED BY THE PROGRAM.
   a. CLEARLY DESCRIBE THE PURPOSES AND FORMAT OF THIS EXPERIMENTING SCHOOL.
   b. ACCEPT RECOMMENDATIONS AND REACTIONS OF GROUP FOR INCORPORATION IN THE GENERAL PLAN.
   c. ENLIST THE SUPPORT OF THIS GROUP IN TWO GENERAL AREAS:
      (1) FOR PURPOSES OF CONVENING MEMBERS OF THEIR RESPECTIVE GROUPS TO SHARE THE INFORMATION AND ENTHUSIASTICALLY SUPPORT THE PROGRAM.
      (2) FOR PURPOSES OF DEVELOPING A LOBBY WITHIN THE MEMBERSHIP TO INFLUENCE OTHERS WHO CAN BE SUPPORTIVE IN BUILDING A POWER BASE FOR ACTION.

2. PLAN A SPECIFIC STRATEGY FOR COORDINATING THE ACTIONS RECOMMENDED IN (2) ABOVE. THIS IS A CRITICAL AREA THAT SHOULD INCLUDE DIRECT, PERSONAL CONTACTS WITH MEMBERS OF THESE GROUPS.

   a. MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL POLITICAL PARTIES

   b. MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL BOARD OF EDUCATION

   c. MEMBERS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE RANKS WITHIN THE CENTRAL ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

   d. MEMBERS OF THE CORPORATE AND INDUSTRIAL SECTOR WHO ARE KNOWN TO BE INTERESTED IN CIVIC AND EDUCATIONAL MATTERS.

   e. OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL TEACHER ORGANIZATION

   f. OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS, INCLUDING GROUPS WHO HAVE A SPECIFIC INTEREST IN EDUCATION

   g. INFLUENTIAL CITIZENS WHO MAY NOT BE INCLUDED IN ANY OF THE GROUPS MENTIONED.

   h. MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRONG SUPPORT ARM AT THE PRELIMINARY STAGES OF THE PLAN IS CRITICAL AND REQUIRES A FORM OF DECENTRALIZED LEADERSHIP WITHIN MANY GROUPS. THEREFORE, A CENTRAL COUNCIL SHOULD BE FORMED TO PROVIDE INFORMATION, LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTION FOR THOSE MENTIONED IN ITEM 1 AND ADDITIONAL MEMBERS FROM THOSE DESCRIBED IN ITEM 2 WHO APPEAR TO BE ESPECIALLY INTERESTED.

IT SHOULD BE RE-EMPHASIZED AT THIS POINT, THAT POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND CENTRAL EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION ARE KEY AREAS FOR SUPPORT SINCE THEY CONTROL THE FISCAL ASPECTS WHICH ARE SO VITAL. THIS IS NOT MEANT TO LESSEN THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GENERAL CITIZENRY NOR THE IMPACT OF SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS BUT PRIORITY ATTENTION MUST BE GIVEN TO THE POLITICAL/EDUCATIONAL SECTOR.

HENCE, THE CENTRAL COUNCIL AND THE OTHER GROUPS WHO WILL BE DEPENDENT UPON THE COUNCIL FOR INFORMATION AND DIRECTION WILL FORM A BASE FOR ACTION.

THE LEADERSHIP OF THE EXPERIMENTING SCHOOL, HAVING DESIGNED A FRAMEWORK OF SUPPORT HAS ADDITIONAL TASKS. MOST OF THESE TASKS ARE RELATED TO A PLANNING PERIOD WHICH CAREFULLY PLOTS MILESTONES AND PROCEDURES FOR SPECIFIC ACTIONS. THERE IS ALSO A CLEAR NEED FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN ASSISTANCE AS WELL AS COUNSEL FROM THOSE WHO ARE SENSITIVE TO GROUP DYNAMICS. A PLAN TO INCORPORATE THE ENERGIES AND EFFORTS OF A DIVERSE GROUP CAN BE EASILY SUBVERTED BY THE VICISSITUDES OF PERSONALITY, HIDDEN AGENDAS, AND PAST HISTORY. THEREFORE, THE PROCESS FOR INTERACTING REQUIRES AN OPENNESS AND SINCERITY ON THE PART OF LEADERSHIP. THIS

OPERATIONAL MODE MUST BE GENERALLY PERCEIVED SO THAT THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT REQUIRED AT THE PRELIMINARY STAGES CAN bE EXTENDED INTO THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERIOD OF THE PROGRAM. AT THIS LATTER POINT IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT THE CENTRAL COUNCIL RE-DEFINE ITS ROLE AND MOVE INTO A SERIES OF SUB-GROUPS FOR ADVISORY PURPOSES IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

1. STAFF SELECTION AND TRAINING
2. STUDENT ACTIVITIES AND SPECIAL PROGRAM
3. GENERAL CURRICULUM
4. PARENT PARTICIPATION
5. UTILIZATION OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES
6. GENERAL ADMINISTRATION AND FISCAL PLANNING
7. PUBLIC RELATIONS
8. THE COUNSELING PROCESS
9. PHYSICAL PLANT AND FACILITIES
10. INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER SCHOOL UNITS
11. PROGRAM EVALUATION

THIS PAPER CANNOT BE VIEWED AS A SEPARATE ASPECT OF THE EXPERIMENTING INSTITUTION BUT RATHER AS A SERIES OF RECOMMENDATIONS WHICH CAN WEAVE THE ELEMENTS OF THIS ENTERPRISE INTO A TOTALITY.

THE VERY FACT THAT OBSOLESCENCE HAS BECOME A CHARACTERISTIC OF SOME EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS DOES NOT MEAN THAT THINGS WILL CHANGE. EVEN IF OUR STUDIES OF ADOLESCENTS AND THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS POINT LOGICALLY TO A SERIES OF NEW STEPS, WE

CANNOT EXPECT CHANGE. THE ENTROPIC NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS MAKES IT OBVIOUS THAT MAINTENANCE OF WHAT IS CAN BE EXPECTED. THEREFORE, THIS PLAN FOR INVOLVING PARENTS, STUDENTS, STAFF, AND MEMBERS OF THE BROADER COMMUNITY IS OF VITAL IMPORTANCE IN PROVIDING THE RATIONALE AND THE PLAN FOR ACTION WHICH CAN BRING THIS NEW INSTITUTION INTO BEING. THE HISTORY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS IS LITTERED WITH THE REMAINS OF IDEAS WHICH NEVER MATERIALIZED. IN TOO MANY CASES, THE FAILURE OF AN IDEA TO BECOME A LIVING REALITY CAN BE TRACED TO THE INSUFFICIENT PLAN FOR SUPPORTING THE IDEA WITH HUMAN ENERGIES AND INFLUENCE AS WELL AS THE LACK OF FINANCIAL FUNDING.

THE NOTION OF EXPERIMENTING SCHOOLS HAS AN APPEAL TO SOME BUT THE DELIVERY OF THIS IDEA WILL DEPEND GREATLY UPON THE KEY LEADERSHIP AND THEIR COLLECTIVE STRENGTH WHICH MUST BE SUPPLEMENTED BY A POWER BASE OF WELL INFORMED, SUPPORTIVE ALLIES IN THIS NEW VENTURE.